

**STATEMENT OF RICHARD B. SMITH
COALITION OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RETIREES
FLAGSTAFF HEARING OCTOBER 13, 2005
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE,
DRUG POLICY AND HUMAN RESOURCES**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and other members of the Subcommittee. My name is Richard Smith. I would like to reiterate the appreciation expressed by other former National Park employees who have appeared before your Subcommittee for holding these hearings to examine the current management of our national parks.

I began my National Park Service (NPS) career as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone National Park in 1959 and retired in 1994 as the Associate Regional Director for natural and cultural resources in the National Park Service's former Regional Office in Santa Fe. I therefore worked for the NPS during the administrations of both Republicans and Democrats. In between those dates, I served in Yosemite, at the Service's ranger training center in Grand Canyon, in the Service's headquarters in Washington, DC, in Everglades National Park, in the Philadelphia Regional Office, in Carlsbad and Guadalupe Mountains, and in Santa Fe with temporary assignments in Fredericksburg National Military Battlefield and in Alaska. Following my retirement, I was asked to return to duty as the Acting Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, a position I occupied for 4 months until the newly-appointed superintendent could leave his previous position. I come before you today representing the Coalition of National Park Service Retirees, a group consisting of 435 former employees of the Service, many of whom were senior leaders. Mr. Chairman, this is the first time in the 89-year history of the National Park Service that its retirees have ever felt the need to join together to comment on the management of our park system. Our group includes two former Directors, 16 former Regional Directors and more than 100 ex-superintendents. To quote an old cliché: we have been there and done that.

What causes a group such as this to give up fishing, hunting, travel and golf, what most retirees do, and instead join together to monitor how the political leadership of the Department of the Interior and the National Park Service are managing national park service areas? Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, it's because we don't like what we see. We don't like it when these political leaders or their appointees instruct our colleagues who are still working to lie to the American people and call cutbacks in visitor services in parks "service level adjustments." We don't like it when the Director of the National Park Service and the Secretary of the Interior travel around the country, boasting that the budget of the National Park Service has more money per acre, per employee and per visitor than ever before. They know that this is true only because they have reduced the number of employees, the number of visitors to parks has dropped and that the acreage of the System has remained relatively static. Park employees we know have told us, on the other hand, the real story of reductions in visitor center hours, elimination of interpretive and environmental education programs, reduction in resources management activities, and even curtailment in resources protection programs. Parks simply don't have enough money for their annual operations. This fact is borne out in the business plans that many parks developed. Just as a typical example in a large park, Yellowstone reported annual operating deficits in resources protection of 3.29 million; visitor experience and enjoyment, \$9.5 million; facility operations,

\$3.4 million; maintenance, \$2.1 million; and management and administration, \$4.3 million. Of course, this type of information flies in the face of the Secretary and the Director's mantra that there is plenty of operating money so we don't hear very much about the business plans anymore.

We would normally applaud the effort going on in many parks in the Intermountain Region to conduct core operations analyses. It is always helpful to make sure that parks are dedicating their human and fiscal resources to the highest priority programs and projects. From what we have seen and heard of the current effort, however, there seem to be some basic flaws. For instance, the analysis follows division breakdowns in parks, categorizing effort in maintenance, protection, interpretation, administration or resources management. This very traditional approach does not promote holistic or innovative thinking. The exercise appears to us to sort work rather than prioritizing it. The analysis shows little regard for effectiveness in accomplishing park goals and objectives as opposed to its emphasis on efficiency. It is also being conducted without public input or review. We are suspicious, moreover, when we see information that was leaked to us from active employees that instruct those conducting the core operations analyses in parks to assume, prior to the analysis, that fully 1/3 of their employees are likely to be engaged in non-core activities. How would you like to be considered non-core? Where does the leadership get this number? I was superintendent or deputy superintendent in 4 parks. We never had 1/3 of our employees involved in work that did not contribute to accomplishing our mission. We know that many smaller parks in the system have well over 90% of their annual operating programs tied up in personnel services rather than the 80% that is the goal of the core operations analysis. If the core operations analysis is just another excuse to reduce employee numbers rather than seriously looking at park operations, then we believe that current employees will not be very willing participants in the exercise.

We are disturbed that despite repeated scientific evidence that snowmobiles disturb the natural quiet of Yellowstone, adversely affect wildlife populations and pose threats to visitor and employee health, and despite the overwhelming desire of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who participated in the public comment periods during the EIS process that snowmobile use be phased out that these machines continue to be permitted in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks based on the desires of Departmental political appointees and their allies in the mechanized recreation industry. The insistence on their continued use devalues science and demonstrates their contempt for public opinion.

We are deeply disappointed that a Departmental political appointee, the former director of the Cody Wyoming Chamber of Commerce, is the Department's lead on the process that will radically alter the management policies of the National Park Service. Despite the assurances from the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks that the Hoffman rewrite was just a suggestion and is now off the table, we know from the NPS employees who are engaged in negotiations with Mr. Hoffman now about the final draft version to be submitted to the public for comment that his suggestions are very much on the table and that the incremental changes that have marked previous policy rewrites are not going to be acceptable to the political appointees of the Department and the Service. What is particularly disturbing about the process that the Bureau and the Department are following in this rewrite is that NPS subject matter specialists and even the superintendents, the ones charged with implementing these policies, will not see the

proposed changes until the general public does. This is unprecedented, Mr. Chairman. Previous policy modifications went through a full field review. There are fewer than 50 current NPS employees who have even seen the various drafts. In fact, no one outside a very select group would have seen the Hoffman redline version had we not leaked it to the press and to our colleagues who are still working. The ensuing editorial comment in over 30 major newspapers across the country demonstrates how little confidence there is in the Department's version of how to preserve and protect our park areas and in the secret process they attempted to use in the rewrite. What are they afraid of? This is no way to conduct business in an era that demands transparency from its government agencies.

We are disturbed that despite the President's campaign pledge to eliminate the maintenance backlog in the National Park System—now the Department says that he merely promised to reduce it—the Congressional Research Service in March of this year estimated the backlog to be between \$4.5 and \$9.69 billion depending on which assumptions one uses. Assistant Secretary Manson recently replied to a question about the maintenance backlog asked by a journalist by asserting that the Administration had invested more than \$4.9 billion in maintenance in the last 4 years. Mr. Chairman, this is a very disingenuous answer. What Assistant Secretary Manson failed to point out is that almost none of this is new money targeted to reduce backlog maintenance. He is simply adding up the maintenance budget for the last 4 years, plus Federal Highway money that was not even included in the final bill recently approved by the Congress, and claiming that it addresses the backlog. The reality is quite the contrary. While the NPS conducts regular maintenance operations, the backlog continues to grow.

We are saddened to watch the ongoing efforts by the political leadership of the Department and the Park Service to privatize our national park system, a system that author Wallace Stegner called, the “best idea America ever had.” The Department and the bureau continue their efforts to push competitive sourcing throughout the system. The idea of outsourcing Park Service maintenance, administrative, research, and resources management operations to the lowest bidder is repugnant to most Americans. It is also highly impractical. The plumber whose job is outsourced is very likely to also be a member of the park's search and rescue team or structural fire brigade. The auto mechanic may also be member of the wildland fire management team. The contract researcher does his/her job and leaves. Unlike a regularly employed researcher, he or she does not have to live with the consequences of the recommendations that he or she makes. There is no way that the lowest bidder can provide these kinds of multi-talented people. And besides, do we really want the low bidder to take care of the parks that previous generations of Americans said deserved protection in perpetuity?

Your congressional colleague, Representative Richard Pombo of California, recently proposed legislation that would require the NPS to raise \$10 million by selling advertising on park brochures and other publications and by allowing park shuttle buses to carry sideboard advertising. His bill also authorized the wholesale naming of park infrastructure to recognize private donors to raise another \$10 million. The bill also called for selling 15 parks for development purposes. Pombo later claimed that this was a joke and that the Congressional Budget Office released his draft bill prematurely. The Coalition of NPS Retirees, however, is not laughing. Neither, Mr. Chairman, is Representative Baird, a co-sponsor of your NPS Centennial Bill and the co-founder, with you, of the National Parks Caucus, who wrote

Representative Pombo a strong letter deploring these privatization efforts. As if this were not enough, the NPS has opened a public comment period on a revised Director's Order 21, the donation policy. This revision opens the door to increased donor recognition opportunities—for a big enough donation, I can now have the Richard Smith bench placed in a park—and eliminates the “prohibited source” provisions, opening the way to donations by corporations that generate profits through tobacco and liquor sales. The march toward privatization continues apace.

What is particularly disturbing about these moves toward privatizing the park system and depending increasingly on fees is that they significantly increase the probabilities that the system becomes less “national” and less open to the “common” American – and more open to commercial, special and regional/local interests, and to Americans who can afford to pay the ever-increasing entrance and user fees. This is not what was intended when the system was established. The only way to change that trend is for Congress to accept the responsibility to “fully” fund the needs of the system so that these other mechanisms of support aren't needed. Mr. Chairman, your Centennial bill would go along way toward accomplishing this goal.

One characteristic of our group, Mr. Chairman, is that we do more than complain about management actions of the current political leadership of the Department and the Service. In September 2004, we published a document entitled, *A Call to Action: Saving our National Park System*. This document contains a 5-step program for reinvigorating the management of the National Park System and returning to the bipartisan support that used to characterize the political oversight of the System in time to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the National Park Service in 2016. In light of the more than 12,000 years of experience in park management possessed by the members of the Coalition, we believe that these recommendations merit examination and subsequent action by the Congress and by the Administration.

Call to Action I:

- There is the immediate need for an annual reoccurring operational budget increase for the National Park Service of at least \$600 million dollars required to restore the Service's ability to manage the daily operations of our National Park System.
- Efforts to weaken the mission of the National Park Service by a variety of initiatives carried out by the current administration must cease, to be replaced by progressive and constructive decisions that celebrate and strengthen that mission.

Call to Action II:

- Establish and convene a non-partisan National Parks Blue Ribbon Commission to examine the most effective organizational model for the governance of the National Park System and the National Park Service to report to Congress and the President on its findings and recommendations.

Call to Action III:

- Establish and convene a non-partisan and technical expert panel to sort “fact from fancy” and determine what are the true budget and personnel needs of the National Park Service, evaluating what governmental processes stand in the way of success and what is required to assure it. This panel will report its findings to the National Parks Blue Ribbon Commission.

Call to Action IV:

- Agency discretion to manage the National Park System must be restored to the National Park Service, where career professionals are valued, encouraged, developed and held accountable to managing the public's trust.

Call to Action V:

- We must revitalize our park system by combining the recommendations of the groups mentioned in Calls to Action II and III into a bold multi-year "*Keeping the Promises*" plan culminating in 2016, the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service.

The entire document, Mr. Chairman, can be found at our website, www.npsretirees.org.

Mr. Chairman, since 1872 with the establishment of Yellowstone, each succeeding generation of Americans has had its opportunity, speaking through its representatives in Congress, to add the areas that were important to that generation to the National Park System. As a matter of generational equity and of respect for those who came before us, we should manage these areas with the highest regard for their resource integrity and their ability to remind us of who we are as a people and a nation. We should not be careless with this legacy nor allow it to be subjected to a political agenda.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to address you and the members of the Subcommittee this morning. I will be pleased to try to answer any questions you or the other members may have. Thank you.